

Documents on Diplomacy: The Source

In Captivity in Algiers

John Lamb to Thomas Jefferson, Madrid, May 20, 1786

After many little Disappointments, I arrived at Algiers the 25th of March and within the term of three or four Days I found That the whole amount of the money in my hands belonging to the public would not purchase the people who are the unfortunate. In consequence of which I Dispatched M^r Randall so that your Excellencies might have the earliest notice of our matters in that Quarter. In a short letter to your Excellencies I stated our affairs accordingly. M^r Randall sailed the 29th or 30th of March with my desire to him to proceed with all possible Dispatch, to give the earliest notes that was in my power, but when I came here I found M^r Randall was in Aranjuez [*in Spain*]. I received a line from him at nine the next evening in consequence of which I wrote him, and desired him to Proceed. He answered my letter, the three letters I herein inclose so that your Excellencies will naturally excuse me for the detention, M^r Randall the bearer of this therefore I have not inclosed his letters. It seems he hath been unwell.

On the 3rd Day of April was admitted to an Audience with the Dey [*the ruler of Algiers*], but would not speak of Peace, set the Slaves a most Exorbitant price—far beyond my limit. The 7th I had a second interview, but still he was of the Same mind. About the 17th I had the third and last interview. He fell something of his first Price and I here inclose the Last Price, which is enormous as your Excellencies will see.

My next interviews were to have an Acquaintance with their Principal minister which I soon brought to pass, by some presents to this ministers confident, and he was our interpreter. He told me it was his Greatest Desire that our peace might be made with their Regency and that for his part he would use his utmost endeavours for this purpose, but until the affairs of Spain were Settled, little could be Done on our matter, and further told me not to mind the little put-offs by the Dey nor the enormous price asked for our slaves; that the price that was set on our people was only to put a more modest face on the Price that they intend to make the Spaniards pay for their People, and advised me to go to Spain and wait until they had done with Spain, and that I might rest assured that he would at all opportunities write to me.

I begged him to write M^r Carmichael [*The American Chargé d'affaires in Spain*] He Did. I begged him to Give me a free pass to come to Algiers and to go when I pleased. He likewise did, but told me that if the letter was exposed that he had wrote M^r Carmichael, he should lose his life, and when I returned that I might expect the Same. I had several interviews with this minister and the above is

the purport and substance, excepting that they had an entire right to make Peace or war, without the Voice of the Grand Seigneur [*the leader of the Ottoman Empire in Constantinople who was the overlord of Algiers*], and that they were under no control by the Ottoman porte [state]. . . .

If your Excellency could procure a letter from the court of France and directed to the Dey with their Desires to him for a Peace with the United States of America it would give Greater weight but such a letter I Dare say would be hard to be Procured: The treatment I received from the French consul was Polite, indeed he paid me great attention. M^r Logie likewise received me as an old friend and Declared to me that he had no orders to counteract my mission from his court, which I am sure of.

I left the Packet [*his ship*] in the hands of Count de Expelly who hath employed her for Spain until I call for her -and have the Count's receipt for the vessel. I thought Proper to leave my own Stores, which I carried over, in Algiers and left them with M^r Woulf who is a very honest good Gentleman, and I believe a friend to our Cause in that Quarter. And by the Desire of Count de Expelly have left the care of our unfortunate People likewise in his hands, to gather four hundred Dollars to Pay their Post expense, and buy them such things as will make them comfortable, which money I am sure will be frugally Expended. I shall await your Excellencies further orders at Alicante, hoping that my conduct may be approved of And Am with Due Respect your Excellencies Most Obedient Humble Servant.

JOHN LAMB

N.B. The Plague is within the limits of the Regency of Algiers in consequence of which it will make very long Quarantines in Spain. The Vessel that I have bought for the convenience of our business I believe will be ordered to Mahón to *Pro forme* Quarantine. To Purchase this Vessel was unavoidable as I could not get to Algiers well without. I here Give your Excellencies an account of the Prices of our unfortunate people and it as follows, *Viz*

3 Captains @ 6,000 Dollars Each per head	18,000
2 mates @ 4,000 Ditto Each per head	8,000
2 Passengers @ 4,000 Ditto Each Per head	8,000
<u>14 Sailors @ 1,400 Ditto Each Per head</u>	<u>19,600</u>

21 Amounts to the enormous Sum of	53,600
11 Percent to be added according to custom	5,896
in Spanish milled Dollars	59,496

So that your Excellencies see how far beyond your Expectations the Sum amounts which renders me incapable of acting until further orders. The price the Spaniards are Giving for their peoples is little Short of what is charged us and they have Eleven hundred men & some upwards in Algiers. It will cost Spain more than one million and one half of Dollars for their Slaves only. The Peace of Spain and their Slaves will amount to more than three million of Dollars. I have only to add that their Cruisers will in all Probability be at Sea by the Sixth of June at farthest. I am of Opinion that if we follow our Pretension for Peace this summer, that they will hear Proposals but not at the price we Expected, nor by the open way we first went to work.

If France will Give nothing but Sealed letters we had better have none: To fight those People the first year will cost us more than half a million Pounds Sterling. I have by Experience of a long Date a Perfect knowledge of the cost of armed Vessels and at the Distance we are from those people and foreign Ports to make use of it will be a heavy Tax on us and without the least Prospect of Gain.

I hope I shall be Excused in Speaking my mind so freely. It is out of Zealous Desires for the Good of the Country I belong To. And it is my Opinion that for a less Sum than the first year would cost us to fight, we can make Peace and if we intend it at all now is the only time to Pursue, as the way is Seemingly open for a Trial [*an attempt*]. I hope there is no more of our People will be so unhappy as to fall into those peoples' hands this Summer, and in that case, in a Measure it will discourage them in their Expectations: Spain is our Sure friend in our Peace with Algiers: but they have not finished their Peace at Present. We shall have their assistance at the conclusion of their peace.

With Due Respect as above J. Lamb

I have no Objections of their being a Trial made at Constantinople, but it will be of no Consequence as to Peace with Algiers as the Count mentions in his letter his Views are to have M^r Woulf appointed in Our peace with Algiers, and M^r Woulf is a very Good man but it is well to take time before larger power is Given Strangers. The Count kept me as much in the Dark as he Could on all accounts: my advice is if we should arm against those people to unite ourselves with those Nations that are not at Peace with Algiers and that will lessen our Expense much on the Occasion. ■

Source

The Emerging Nation: A Documentary History of the Foreign Relations of the United States under the Articles of Confederation, 1780-1789,
Mary A. Giunta, Editor-in-Chief, Volume II. Washington, DC :
Government Printing Office, 1996.

NA: PCC, item 87, v. 1, pp. 522-531 (ALS); M247, reel 115